

Ornaments to individuality

MELBOURNE: Constanze Zikos,
Elizabeth Pulie/Sutton Gallery

Jonas Balsaitis: Space Time
Structures/Australian Centre for
Contemporary Art

By Robert Rooney

THE word art means to most people something so indefinite that they do not attempt to argue about it. It is only when the word is preceded by a qualifying adjective that the fun begins. If you speak of ornamental art, earnest people assure you that all ornament is debauch; if you speak of decorative art, you are told that decoration nowadays can be only an incidental consequence of self-expression."

So begins the chapter on "The Fitness of Ornament" by H.S. Goodhart-Rendal — a Slade professor of fine art at Oxford University, noted for "a refined sense of humour that allows him to take 'modern' art seriously, but not tragically" — in *The Conquest of Ugliness*. Further on, in this irresistible curiosity from the 30s, he observes that "a fondness for ornament is no more readily acknowledged by refined persons than would be a fondness for gin, and the natural appetite of the unrefined for pretty patterns is represented as a weakness requiring drastic methods of cure".

Setting aside the distinctions of class, it must be said that ornament and decorative patterns in art have tended to suffer from a bad image in this century. The word decorative is often used pejoratively in relation to modern painting, but perhaps more so in relation to abstraction, which is condemned for lacking those humanistic qualities some people regard as belonging almost exclusively to figurative or realist art.

In her *Perspectiva* introduction to Constanze Zikos's recent works, Robin McKenzie notes: "Pattern painting in the 1970s constituted a radical extension of abstract art — it was radical in breaking the taboo against the decorative." Not that it did so without opposition or the inclination to treat such works less seriously than some of the more purer forms of abstract painting, especially those of a reductive nature.

Before our suburbs were inflicted with the creeping uniformity of heritage controls, newcomers from Greece and Italy used to paint and decorate their homes and gardens in a manner that reflected the popular taste and culture of their former homelands. While there were those who mocked their efforts, condemning them as kitsch, to certain artists of the late 60s and 70s they were a genuine creative expression of ordinary people. It is to this spirit of cultural transplanta-

tion that Zikos, as a Greek-born Australian, belongs.

Like all of his paintings in recent years, in the nine small, laminex-framed works on display at the Sutton Gallery references are made to Greek art and culture; to those classical ideals which are made impure, even sinister, by the addition of colour. As McKenzie observes, "he starts with the materials and colour of interior decor, peccadillos of suburban taste — and turns them into abstract art".

Within the stencilled precision of their tripartite formats one recognises both images (pillared temples and urn-like vessels) and ornamental designs (running patterns like the Grecian fret and the meander).

ZIKOS'S use of colour is often quite complex, but not at the expense of clarity, while his predilection for symmetrical compositions never induces boredom.

In Sutton's main gallery, spring is bustlin' out all over in the floriated fancies of Elizabeth Pulie, which seemed to be derived from another, folksier book of ornamental designs. Pulie's paintings are usually of floral patterns and images, which are enclosed by geometrical borders and outlined in black. They also seem European in origin, but are not as coolly classical as Zikos's Greek friezes. Although generally light and cheerful, they are given just that necessary edge by the ran-

dom ridges of the smooth, creamy ground on which they are painted.

While some writers prefer to either deny or under-emphasise Zikos's relation to certain aspects of modernist abstraction (how, for example, can laminex be called an unconventional material when there's *Ti Parks?*), one is reminded, nevertheless, of such antecedents by the exhibition Jonas Balsaitis: *Space Time Structures*, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

Balsaitis began experimenting with film in 1970, the year of his first solo exhibition. The paintings from this period were highly complex orderings of gridded patterns that were reminiscent, at times, of Islamic and fin de siècle designs, but showing an allegiance to a similar layering of material in contemporary serial abstraction. However, it is in a very large canvas, now in the National Gallery of Victoria, that one can see patterns closely related to those in his 1977 animated film *Space and Time Structures*.

Although he virtually gave up painting to concentrate on making films, Balsaitis's animation of abstract patterns and images was in a way a filmic version of the dynamic rhythms and spatial ambiguities created by the layering of grids and repeated forms in much serial abstraction. From the late 70s onwards, he has continued to exhibit drawings, etchings and paintings, all of which are directly related to his films.

Considering the close relationship between Balsaitis's paintings and graphics and his films, it is unfortunate that the former were not added to the display of drawings used in animating *Space Time Structures*, particularly when the walls of ACCA's large gallery are empty for the duration of the show.

Blossoming:
Sixty Three
1993, gesso
and acrylic on
canvas by
Elizabeth Pulie

